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Reflections from across the aisle

Kevin Diaz, Star Tribune Washington Bureau Correspondent

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WASHINGTON, D.C.-- They reached opposite conclusions about whether the United States should go to war against Iraq. They both visited Baghdad after Saddam Hussein was toppled, and what they saw didn't shake them from their original positions.

Now, as the United States prepares to hand over the governing of Iraq to Iraqis, Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum and Republican Rep. John Kline hold sharply different views about Iraq's future, and the U.S. role in the country.

The basic idea about the Iraq war was to remove Saddam Hussein, establish democracy and go home. How do you think the United States is doing in meeting its goals?

McCollum: I don't think we're meeting those goals at all. We did remove Saddam from power, but we have not established a democracy in Iraq. ... The basic premise of going to war was weapons of mass destruction, that the U.S. was under possible attack from Iraq, and there was a link between Al-Qaida and Sept. 11, and all of those have proven to be false.

Kline: The military operation in Iraq was more than just about removing Saddam Hussein and establishing democracy. It was to prosecute the larger global war on terror. I think the president made very clear after he talked to us after Sept. 11, 2001, that this was going to be a long war. ... So in meeting the goal of prosecuting the enemy -- and holding those nations that support, harbor and train terrorists equally responsible -- I think we're doing pretty well. We have killed and captured an awful lot of people. Certainly it was the objective to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and certainly that's been done. Bringing democracy, we're making remarkable progress.

Do we need to ratchet down our original expectations about establishing an Iraqi democracy?

McCollum: I think the president has a very lofty goal of establishing democracy in Iraq. On June 30, Iraq is not a democracy, and it will not be fully sovereign ...[because] it is not a government that can support itself. ... Our original reason for going to war was not to establish a democracy. Now that we are there, we have to have realistic goals for when our troops are going to come home -- in other words, an exit strategy.

Kline: I don't think so. That's exactly what we're going to establish is an Iraqi democracy. That's different very probably from an American democracy, or a British democracy. But the will of the people will be determined through elections. What form it is going to be, a republic, or a pure democracy, we don't know right now.

If Iraqis choose a theocracy that imposes Islamic law in the country, could the United States live with that, or should it intercede to force a democratic government more in line with our own?

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McCollum: If the Iraqis choose Islamic law, that will be Iraqis' choice. They need to be in control of their own government, their own sovereignty and their own security. The United States should not be setting itself up for the next generation to be providing security, economic aid and a shadow government. So if we're serious about Iraqi sovereignty, then Iraqis need to be in charge.

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Kline: I think we could not live with the Taliban essentially moving from Afghanistan into Iraq. To me, that would be a failure. I don't think that's likely to happen. Iraq has been more secular than Afghanistan. ... I just don't think it's likely that there would be a move to reestablish the Taliban.

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With a three-way power struggle between the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds -- with Saddam loyalists thrown in as a wild card -- how do you rate the chances of avoiding civil war and achieving long-term stability in Iraq?

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McCollum: I have to tell you, we've put in place a government that cannot support itself. So will it lead to civil war? Possibly. ... I think the Iraqi people want peace for themselves and their families. Here again, we have to create a partnership with other countries, in order to give the Iraqis the time they need. We have to find a way to allow the Iraqis to come together and build a government that is sustainable, so that they do not have an outbreak of civil war. We created a vacuum when we went in there and began a war that was our choice.

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Kline: Actually, I rate the chances pretty high of avoiding a civil war. It's my understanding ... that there really is a sense in Iraq of being Iraqi. Yes, there are the distinctions that you outlined. You would think the Kurds would be the most problematic, because they're geographically isolated largely in the north, and there's been an effort on their part for generations to have an independent Kurdistan. Having said that, though, they seem to be working together well now, and they understand that their future lies in a combined Iraq, with its enormous potential for wealth, oil, agriculture and water.

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Do you think the war in Iraq and the toppling of Saddam has made America safer?

McCollum: No, because we have expanded the war on terrorism. ...The threat to America was Al-Qaida, and Al-Qaida was in Afghanistan primarily. The war in Iraq has taken resources away from the war on terrorism. North Korea continues to be a threat, and they do have weapons of mass destruction. Iraq is in a fragile state, and we do know that terrorists are now coming to Iraq. ... We've removed one dictator, but that wasn't the original reason we went to war. Now we have spread our resources very thin.

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Kline: Yes, I do. It's recognized by everybody, on both sides. ... Everybody in the civilized world understands that Saddam Hussein is a really bad guy. He's a mass murderer, torturer, on a scale that's hard for us to envision. But more than that, if you're prosecuting a global war on terror, going after them where you can find them, well, there's a concentration now. Iraq is the focal point in the world in the war on terror. So we're able to hunt them there and concentrate, and that's a good thing. It does make us safer.

Considering the costs to the United States -- both in treasury and life -- do you think it has been worth it?

McCollum: Here again, the reason we were told we were going to war was that the United States was in imminent danger. We were not. We were misled. Billions of dollars have gone into no-bid contracts. There is little accountability to taxpayers for reconstruction projects. So do I think it was a good idea that we went into this war by choice? No.

Kline: Absolutely. You don't like to lose one life. But we were all going about our business on Sept. 11, 2001, and we were attacked. War was brought to us. Thousands died. It should have convinced all of us that we were at war, and that they were going to come after us. So you have to keep it in that context, of how we're going to fight this war, with the money we've spent and

casualties we've suffered in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa and other places. It's much better than fighting it here.

Who will hold real power in Iraq after June 30, the new Iraqi government or the U.S. military?

McCollum: Our government and the coalition forces have told the world that the Iraqis will have sovereignty on June 30. But they still don't have a way to provide the security they need to go forward. This should be a partnership between the Iraqi government, the Iraqi military, the Iraqi police and the coalition. The American military, as far as I've been told, is not going to be in charge.

Kline: The way we're structuring it, it will be the new Iraqi government. However, we have an extremely powerful military force over there, and I'm sure that will be viewed by many in the world as 'the power.' Because that's how they view power. ... But that's not how this country works. We want to have the Iraqis take over. ... Ambassador [John] Negroponte comes in as the U. S. ambassador. He will be the head of a country team. Now admittedly a large country team, because you've got the [U.S. military's] Central Command in there. But the Iraqis will have the power, and we will insist on it.

How long do you expect significant numbers of U.S. troops to be stationed in Iraq?

McCollum: The Bush administration has presented no exit strategy. And our soldiers, who keep having their stays extended, deserve to know when they can expect to come home. Americans also need to know when we will stop carrying the full burden in Iraq. Because right now we're carrying the military burden and the financial burden.

Kline: I would expect it would be years. Certainly we'll have a formal presence there until after we have the elected government, which won't be until 2005. I shudder to bring this up, but if you look at Bosnia and Kosovo, it's eight years or so we've been there now. We were 60 years in Japan and Germany, 50 years in South Korea. I'm not projecting it will be decades like that. But I would suspect it will be quite some time ... a couple of years, at least.

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